

# BEARING WOR(L)DS

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# SPELLING WORDS CASTING SPELLS

“As the roman alphabet spread through oral Europe, the Old English word *spell*, which had meant simply to recite a story or tale, took on the new double meaning: on the one hand, it now meant to arrange, in the proper order, the written letters that constitute the name of a thing or a person; on the other, it signified a magic formula or charm. Yet these two meanings were not nearly as distinct as they have come to seem to us today. For to assemble the letters that make up the name of a thing, in the correct order, was precisely to effect a magic, to establish a new kind of influence over that entity, to summon it forth! To spell, to correctly arrange the letters to form a name or a phrase, seemed thus at the same time to cast a spell, to exert a new and lasting power over the things spelled.”<sup>1</sup>

\*

“Magic exists in most societies in one way or another. And one of the forms it exists in, in a lot of places, is: if you know a thing’s true name, you have power over the thing, or the person. And of course, it’s irresistible because I’m a writer; I use words. And knowing the names of things is—I do—magic. I do make up things that didn’t exist before when naming them.”<sup>2</sup>

As David Abram and Ursula K. Le Guin so aptly put it: words carry an intrinsic pivotal magic and, therefore, power. I would like to start by relating Abram’s interpretational story of the factors that might have allowed for such magical power to be placed in written letters, before stressing the effects and influence of such power in poetry. At various points throughout this paper, I will invite voices featured in the poetry compendium *Spells: 21st-Century Occult Poetry*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, Vintage books, 1996, p.133

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from an interview in *Worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin [speech transcript]*, directed by Arwen Curry, 2018

<sup>3</sup> *Spells: 21st-Century occult poetry*, edited by Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamás, Ignota Books, 2018

<sup>4</sup> So Mayer, *The Broken Open*, in *Spells*, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Extract from the poem *For Those Who Mispronounce My Name* by Kayo Chingonyi in *Spells*, 2018

<sup>6</sup> So Mayer, *The Broken Open*, in *Spells*, 2018

<sup>7</sup> David Abram, *The spell of the sensuous*, Vintage books, 1996, p. 133

<sup>8</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984

<sup>9</sup> Her text *The Broken Open* is the introduction of *Spells*, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Extract from the poem *The Past’s Future* by Dolly Turing in *Spells*, 2018

<sup>11</sup> Extract from the poem *Camisado* by CaConrad in *Spells*, 2018

<sup>12</sup> Extract from the poem *Spell to Reverse a Line* by Bhanu Kapil in *Spells*, 2018

# THE OF OUR WOMBS FRUITS OF OUR WOMBS

Words are passed on to us through collective history, memory, and the unconscious. *The right words are imbued with power by the righteousness of those who spoke them before us.*<sup>4</sup> Therefore, writing operates as a generative process allowing for

a shared legacy, that we bear a responsibility for, to be brought to the world. After having been carried inside and nurtured, words are spelled out in the world where they continue to grow and take on new meanings.

*Did no one tell you naming is a magical act,  
words giving shape to life,  
life revived by utterance,  
so long as proper care  
is taken to pronounce the words correctly  
thereby completing the spell?*<sup>5</sup>

Our duty is to honour, bear, and care for words before enabling them to emancipate themselves from us. In this respect, writing bears similarities with the act of giving life. Not only a process of

inner growth, it points to an act of separation and detachment, which can therefore be painful. So Mayer beautifully describes that embryonic state prior to the delivering of words:

*In the beginning was the Word.*

# NO

*This is about the moment before the word,  
when everything inside you is broken open.*

*Words, together;  
multiple and multivalent,  
coming in a rush,  
sounding in a chorus,  
a forcible waterfall.  
A dam breaking.  
A difficult birth.*<sup>6</sup>

# OBSOURE

Mayer refers to the *broken open* as a time of collective trauma and historical confusion. For David Abram, the confusion upstream from that *difficult birth* could result from the following phenomenon:

*Yet we can now realize that to learn to spell was also, and more profoundly, to step under the influence of the written letters ourselves, to cast a spell upon our own senses. It was to exchange the wild and multiplicitous magic of an intelligent natural world for the more concentrated and refined magic of the written word.<sup>7</sup>*

According to him, the power placed in written letters stems from a progressive disconnection from the magic interplay of our senses with the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, at a time when the technology of writing encountered and spread through a previously oral culture. However, as he writes later, it is likely that this ancestral reciprocity with the animate earth went to lodge someplace else, in what was to become our “inner

world.” Following that logic, magic was never lost but became incorporated. Displaced, it survived in our mind-body. Having highlighted earlier the fact that writing is an embodied practice allows us therefore to envision possibilities it could offer to reconnect with what has been shifted from an external to an internal realm; especially since, as Abram stresses, it might have contributed to this displacement in the first place.

*[...] For it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless – about to be birthed but already felt.<sup>8</sup>*

Paying tribute to Audre Lorde’s words, I believe that poetry offers a fertile ground for the exploration of inner *ideas* or, as I shall infer later, *worlds*. Besides, So Mayer’s concept of the *broken open* was also brought up in the light of poetry<sup>9</sup>. Audre Lorde too uses the metaphor of birth when referring to the act of composing poetry. However, she describes that moment preceding it in different terms than So Mayer. Whereas Mayer alludes to a profuse lyrical force, Lorde seems to point to something rather unidentified in its shape and nature. She also draws attention to the *feeling* experienced in what we now like to call the *broken open*. My suggestion is that this sensation could be detected as a residual trace of the ancestral magic that connected us long ago to the earth, now relayed to the rank of an unknown presence. Based on the premise that this feeling before the word echoes the existence

of latent dimensions, the *difficult birth* So Mayer refers to could consist in bringing this unknowable darkness into our physical experience. In order for this to happen, this state of uncertainty, the *broken open*, has to be acknowledged, confronted, and embraced. The word *witch* comes from Old English *wiccian*, from the German *wicken*, *wikken*, “of obscure origin.” Obscure origins are, almost by definition, forgotten or unknown but still, as everything we inherit, deep rooted in the psyche (be it body memories, beliefs, practices, rituals, etc.). Therefore, I believe that the ability to know a thing’s true name, in the words of Le Guin, consists in acquiring an embodied knowledge of what words bring from this obscure origin and being able to reveal it. I believe that it lies in the power of conjuring words to summon unknown and forgotten worlds, e.g. worlds of the body, emotions, and the unconscious.

# ORIGINS

*To build what we saw,  
make magic in the mountains  
of our dreams, like, no idea  
what the power of stories,  
Words / breath / touch  
Could be.<sup>10</sup>*

Emma Talbot,  
*You Were Brought into the World*, 2018  
Watercolour on paper, 30 x 42 cm.



# STITCHING WOUNDS

The term *wikken* could also derive from the same etymology as the German word *wissen* (knowledge). The obscure origin of witchcraft might then also

indicate an alternate form of knowing, one shared with other beings. One that David Abram urges us to tap into.

*poetry is the opposite of escape  
but makes this world endurable  
how the smallest puddle  
reflects the entire sky<sup>11</sup>*

In their poem *Camisado*, CAConrad actually views poetry as an embodied practice to connect with an ecosystem. Could summoning internal worlds awaken our connection to the outside world? We have started by acknowledging that defining writing in terms of separation might echo an ancestral disconnection from the earth. However, we can now stress that poetry can be approached as one way of restoring interconnectedness, an equilibrium

both of ourselves and of the outside world. For So Mayer, this reconciliation can only be reached by knotting, stitching, and weaving. By collecting pieces of the fractured, the *broken open*, and putting them together. By embodying the obscured in our conscious life, by taking the words back into the physical, affective, thinking, and spiritual body, in order to, in the words of Bhanu Kapil, *regain one's wholeness as a human being.*<sup>12</sup>

# TRANSFORMATION RESURGENCE

When words stitch tears and clean the wounds, magical language offers a space for healing and catharsis. I would like to conclude by asserting that this influence upon our senses and upon our sensorial experience of the earth also functions as an invitation, to rebuild, once healed, this experience. Considering that poetry can function as a vehicle for change and regeneration implies that this practice offers

possibilities for things to be altered in their authors and their reader's lives, for new scenarios to be shaped. The magical power placed in poetry is therefore a power to transform our realities, to remake them in accordance with our respective values, fights, and issues and to reclaim them on different levels. Therefore, it possesses the most powerful gift. The power to wo(r)ld our wor(l)ds.

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